Melmoth réconcilié lies among Balzac’s Études philosophiques and illustrates a visionary power in the pages describing the hero Castanier at the height of his fantastic abilities. But these moments of high-minded exposition of what Balzac considered a science degrade into satire and comic veniality as the novella comes to a close. High philosophical matter framed in a satirical manner also characterizes L’elixir de longue vie and Massimilla Doni, but it is in Melmoth réconcilié that a focus on money supplies the social satire. Balzac borrowed the character John Melmoth from the famous gothic narrative Melmoth the Wanderer, written by the Irish Huguenot clergyman Charles Robert Maturin in 1820. In that novel, Melmoth, as Victor Sage comments, appears to others and offers to exchange with them the pact he has made with the devil; in spite of the promise of an immediate end to their misery, none welcomes the exchange:

The Wanderer appears at crises of suffering and despair in the lives of a range of men and women. In the main . . . he does not cause their predicament, but he predicts it, witnesses it, and makes his offer: if they will change places with him, their fleshly sufferings will cease. His peals of demonic laughter partly register his inexpressibly self-contradictory emotion at the suspicion that he is predestined to fail over and over again, and therefore to remain where he is, neither properly in nor outside human history. (Melmoth the Wanderer xvi)
In such Faustian narratives the hero typically seeks ultimate knowledge, a philosophical insight, but Balzac’s recycling of the model distills such power into mere money, and he does this to begin with by putting Melmoth in Paris, the capital of money.

In Balzac’s satire, Melmoth’s victim is appropriately enough a cashier. The witty prologue to the tale describes the zoological species of the caissier, a hybrid and irreproducible species that Civilization obtains in the Social Realm as botanists do flowers in the garden: “Cet homme est un caissier, véritable produit anthropomorphe, arrosé par les idées religieuses, maintenu par la guillotine, ébranché par le vice, et qui pousse à un troisième étage entre une femme estimable et des enfants ennuyeux” [This man is a cashier, a veritable anthropomorphic product, watered with religious ideas, supported by the guillotine, pruned by vice, and growing on a fourth floor between an estimable wife and tedious children] (10: 345). Frequently calling him “le caissier” instead of by his name, Balzac brings anthropological irony to bear on the zoological specimen or the type—the mere handler of money. At the close of the prologue, Balzac’s narrator warns that this preparatory observation should help sufficiently intelligent minds to fathom “les véritables plaies de notre civilisation qui, depuis 1815, a remplacé le principe Honneur par le principe Argent” [the true scourges of our civilization, which, since 1815, has replaced the principle of Honor with the principle of Money] (10: 347). This phrase closes the prologue on a note of sarcastic irony; Honor is a matter of principles, but there can be no principles where Money is concerned (see La Maison Nucingen), and while most of the prologue satirizes the species known as cashier, the government’s treatment of people of talent is the deeper object of criticism. The date of 1815 points to a Restoration that was not the restoration of ancien régime power, based on birth, land, and honor, but rather an instauration of the new plague of capitalism, or Money, that fails to provide principles like those of Honor. Françoise Gaillard, who wrote a strong analysis of the story (“Aux limites du genre”), incidentally ennobles money by insisting on money as a principle, which determines realistic meaning, but I see Balzac primarily showing up money as the barest, lowest form of power—power sought for materialistic and egotistical reasons in opposition, for instance, to idealistic and altruistic purposes such as revolution, social benefit, or religious fervor.

Melmoth suddenly appears to Castanier, Nucingen’s cashier, just as the cashier is forging the banker’s signature on a quittance of five hundred thou-
sand francs, the amount he has stolen from the cash drawer. The very fact that Melmoth penetrates the vault through its multiple barriers—human, stone, and metal—immediately symbolizes the superiority of a power based on total knowledge over one based on money. That evening, at the theater and at the apartment of Castanier’s mistress, Melmoth convinces Castanier that he is going to be caught and hanged for his crime unless he takes his place. Castanier accepts the deal, thereby acquiring Melmoth’s powers; he brushes off the unfaithful Aquilina and indulges in vast orgies of self-gratification, which are accurately pegged as petit-bourgeois by Françoise Gaillard: “L’ancien caissier reste ‘rond de cuir’ dans ses envies” [The former cashier remains a ‘pencil pusher’ in his desires] (“Aux limites” 130).

What high philosophical matter might one find among such tawdry characters and events? First, there is the portrait of the Balzacian visionary type. Melmoth describes the powers he possesses because of his pact with the devil in terms that are strikingly similar to words that describe Balzac’s not supernatural visionary characters, Vautrin in particular. Melmoth’s supernatural abilities materialize as “un regard de feu qui vomissait des courants électriques, espèces de pointes métalliques par lesquelles Castanier se sentait pénétré, traversé de part en part, et cloué” [a fiery look that belched forth electrical currents, like metallic spikes which Castanier felt penetrate him, go clean through him, and pin him down] (10: 366). When Melmoth speaks, we can imagine Vautrin subjugating Rastignac in Le père Goriot: “Qui donc est assez fort pour me résister? . . . Ne sais-tu pas que tout ici-bas doit m’obéir, que je puis tout? . . . Don’t you know that everything here on earth must obey me, that I can do anything? I read in the hearts of men. . . . My eyes penetrate walls] (10: 364–65). He literally makes “la pluie et le beau temps” [rain and fair weather] (10: 368).

There is also the important philosophical conception of human desire, which echoes La peau de chagrin. Describing the condition of the visionary as represented in Castanier, after his exchange with Melmoth, Balzac shows us a man for whom every desire is satisfied except desire itself: “Ses lèvres devinrent ardentes de désir, comme l’étaient celles de Melmoth, et il haletait après l’inconnu, car il connaissait tout” [His lips became ardent with desire, as were Melmoth’s, and he gasped for the unknown—because he knew everything] (10: 375–76). Having satisfied every wish, “ce fut une dissipation de toutes les forces et de toutes les jouissances. . . . Cette énorme puissance, en un instant appréhendée, fut en un instant exercée, jugée, usée. Ce qui était tout, ne fut rien. Il arrive souvent que la possession tue les plus immenses poèmes du désir, aux rêves duquel l’objet possédé répond rarement” [there
was a dissipation of all his strength and of all his pleasures. . . . This enormous power, seized in one moment, was in one moment exerted, judged, worn out. What had been all was nothing. It often happens that possession kills the most immense poems of desire, with whose dreams the object, once possessed, rarely complies] (10: 374). Possession of the entire earth means nothing to him (10: 376). At the moment when the cashier comes to realize the “mot terrible” (10: 380), that he will be as he is for all eternity, Balzac tells us how desire is yet born in him: if there is merely a point on the earth or in the heavens that is forbidden to him, he becomes preoccupied with it.

We are clearly in Études philosophiques territory, but it is philosophy reduced to money, which supplies the anthropological analysis when Balzac, with a studied caution, compares the cashier’s obsession to a banker’s:

S’il était permis de comparer de si grandes choses aux niaiseries sociales, il ressemblait à ces banquiers riches de plusieurs millions à qui rien ne résiste dans la société; mais qui, n’étant pas admis aux cercles de la noblesse, ont pour idée fixe de s’y agréger, et ne comptent pour rien tous les privilèges sociaux acquis par eux, du moment où il leur en manque un. (10: 380)

[If one may be permitted to compare such great things to the piddling nonsense of social life, he resembled those rich bankers who own several million and against whom nothing in society resists; but who, not being admitted into noble circles, have the idée fixe of joining them and consider all the social privileges they have acquired as nothing, as long as one of them is missing.]

The power of money to acquire social privilege is only a degraded power, in comparison to noble birth. The reader may well think of Nucingen in this image of a banker stupidly yearning for the one thing he cannot buy; how much more niais is Castanier, the mere cashier! The cashier is the banker without privilege.¹

In spite of the inanity of this comparison, the notion of the idée fixe points us to the loftiest philosophical topic of the tale. The point forbidden to Castanier and the driving force of the scientific thought in Melmoth réconcilié, the “si grandes choses” that really undergird Balzac’s appropriation of Maturin’s conceit—these serious matters are the thought of religion and the comforts

¹. Note that the hero is called “le caissier” as well as Castanier in the part of the narrative that recounts his stealing from Nucingen, the affair with Aquilina, and the eventual “sale” of the demonic power, but at the philosophical high points, the hero is called only Castanier for seven pages (10: 374–81).
provided by religious salvation. “En se voyant exclu de ce que les hommes ont nommé le ciel dans tous leurs langages, [Castanier] ne pouvait plus penser qu’au ciel” [Seeing himself excluded from what people, in all their languages, have named heaven, [Castanier] could think only about heaven] (10: 376–77). He becomes violently agitated with religious feeling: “il ne pensait plus qu’à l’avenir de ceux qui prient et qui croient” [he thought only about the future of those who pray and have faith] (10: 377). After observing Melmoth reconciled, calm in death and transfigured after his repentance, transformed by the hand of God (10: 378), Castanier becomes a mere man after having been a demon for several days, and he comes to know divine power. “Il eut bientôt dans la physionomie, comme Melmoth, quelque chose de grand” [Like Melmoth, his physiognomy soon held greatness] (10: 382).

But showing the power of religion is not Balzac’s final purpose in Melmoth réconcilié, as both Gaillard and Émeline Dhommée argue more fully than I do here, the latter especially. Immediately after this “quelque chose de grand” shows that Castanier knows divine power, he stumbles on the idea of trading off his power, just as he had accepted it from Melmoth as his replacement in the pact with the devil, and he realizes that the current social climate of “fatale indifférence en matière de religion” [fatal indifference as concerns religion] (10: 382) will make it easy to find a buyer for the pact. This articulation between the high and the low moments of the story occurs with the realization that there is a place for trading, and it is that representation of capitalism, the Bourse: “Si je puis trouver une âme à négocier, n’est-ce pas là?” [If I am to find a soul to trade, wouldn’t it be there?] (10: 382). From this point forward, no lofty philosophy remains—only satire: “Castanier alla joyeux à la Bourse, en pensant qu’il pourrait trafiquer d’une âme comme on y commerce des fonds publics” [Castanier went cheerfully to the Bourse, thinking he would be able to barter a soul in the same way one trades government bonds] (10: 382–83). The soul becomes an object to which a monetary value can be given, and this Étude philosophique reveals its grounding in an Étude de mœurs. Commerce, le négoce, takes the place of perceptions of the infinite, just as the cashier had taken the place of Melmoth; the romance of the fantastic falls to the banal realities. At the Bourse, transformations have nothing to do with the grandeur of the soul’s aspirations; they are merely business affairs, according to the cashier hawking his diabolical wares: “N’est-ce pas une affaire comme une autre? Nous sommes tous actionnaires dans la grande entreprise de l’éternité” [Isn’t it a transaction like any other? We are all shareholders in the great enterprise of eternity’s firm] (10: 383–84).

And he is right. Just as the prologue announces, the cashier has no trouble making the sale: he quickly finds a buyer in the suitably venal Claparon (10:
384), who sells it to a notary after paying off his debts. In two sentences, the pact with the devil is bought and sold several times, losing in value at each sale and also tumbling down the social ladder. It starts at the level of banker-businessman with Claparon; it costs seven hundred thousand francs for the notary, five hundred thousand francs for a real estate developer, three hundred thousand francs for an ironmonger, and finally two hundred thousand francs to a carpenter, after which buyers for this “inscription sur le Grand-livre de l’enfer” [stock certificate on Hell’s ledger] (10: 385) become scarce for lack of faith. By the end of the afternoon, barely an hour and a half after the first sale, the owner of the pact is a house painter, too low down on the social ladder even to recognize the power he holds: “Ce peintre en bâtiment, homme simple, ne savait pas ce qu’il avait en lui-même. Il était tout chose, dit-il à sa femme quand il fut de retour au logis” [This house painter, a simple man, did not know what he had in himself. “He felt all funny,” he said to his wife when he returned home] (10: 386).

This could have been the end of the story, but Balzac, never one to resist a joke when the opportunity arises, tacks on yet another replacement, this time a notary’s clerk, favored object of Balzac’s joyful satires and placed de facto at the very bottom of the ladder. Amossy and Rosen (163) point out that the notary’s clerk is a double of Castanier. All this fellow needs is ten thousand francs to buy his Euphrasie a shawl so she will sleep with him. If ever the holders of Melmoth’s immense power were brought to reflect on the even greater immensity of God’s power, as Castanier does at the height of his, such philosophy is lost for good: the notary’s clerk thinks only of sex with Euphrasie: “comme il avait le diable au corps, il y resta douze jours sans en sortir en y dépensant tout son paradis, en ne songeant qu’à l’amour et à ses orgies au milieu desquelles se noyait le souvenir de l’enfer et de ses privilèges” [as he was a lusty devil, he stayed there twelve days without leaving and spent all of his paradise, thinking only about love and orgies, in the midst of which the memory of hell and its privileges were drowned] (10: 387). Thanks to such thoughtless behavior, the power discovered by the Irishman is lost to humanity, and neither Orientalists, nor mystics, nor archeologists concerned with such matters are able to rediscover the means of evoking the demon. On the thirteenth day the clerk dies from an accidental overdose of a mercury-laced drug, taken, one gathers, to cure a venereal disease, and his soul presumably goes to the devil, thus ending the chain of replacements. The sheen of mercury is silvery but not silver—not “argent” but “vif argent”; Gaillard notes this pun (“Aux limites” 130). Melmoth’s power has fallen down the money ladder to the level of raw sex, its value becoming finally too low to continue to be worth even a narrative.
Here the story really did end, until Balzac added, on proofs, a page of dialogue, capping the joke: he stages an encounter between the other clerks, with their particular sort of witticisms, and a German demonologist who solemnly believes it when the clerks tell him their comrade was “emporté dans la planète de Mercure” [carried off to the planet Mercury] (10: 387). In the dialogue constituting this final scene, the demonologist quotes Jakob Boehm, the German mystic, as translated by Saint-Martin, the French mystic, prompting mystifying remarks by the clerks, so that the story ends on Balzac’s satire of the German demonologist: “Quoiqu’il fût un démonologue de première force, l’étranger ne savait pas quels mauvais diables sont les clercs; il s’en alla, ne comprenant rien à leurs plaisanteries, et convaincu que ces jeunes gens trouvaient Boehm un génie pyramidal.—Il y a de l’instruction en France, se dit-il” [Although he was a demonologist of the first order, the foreigner did not know what little devils clerks can be; he went away, understanding nothing of their jesting and convinced that these young men found Boehm to be a colossal genius. “People are educated in France,” he said to himself] (10: 388). And these are the last words of the ending. We are now down at the level of the inane witticisms of the “esprit clerc,” in which any silly remark is good because it is not serious. Both Les employés and Le colonel Chabert portray the low wit of clerks. One almost has the feeling that Balzac attached the whole ending so he could make the atrocious pun about clerks being such “mauvais diables”—and I suppose they are poor devils because in them the devil’s power is lost. In an article entitled “Melmoth réconcilié ou un diable peut en cacher un autre,” Émeline Dhommée has done the definitive study of the diabolism—the division, scission, and disunion—that defines money as “mauvais diables.”

But what makes Melmoth réconcilié important for understanding Balzac? The story is neither a “sequel” to Maturin’s Melmoth the Wanderer nor a “parody” of the last great gothic novel, as people writing outside the Balzacian context are wont to say: “Melmoth réconcilié is Balzac’s sequel to Maturin’s novel, and it becomes extremely interesting as it attempts to lead us out of the Gothic into the world of proper bourgeois writing” (Lanone 77). Victor Sage in his edition of Maturin’s novel writes: “In 1835, Balzac wrote his famous parody, Melmoth Reconcilié” [sic] (xiii), and Sage accuses it of not being “even” (xiv). Michel Butor also writes: “Melmoth réconcilié, c’est l’achèvement et la correction du livre de Maturin” [Melmoth réconcilié is the completion and correction of Maturin’s book] (“La pollution bancaire” 46).
In the 1970s, interpreters of literature might have said that the exchange of the gift of quasi-immortality is a figure for the exchange of knowledge with the reader—and it is worth a moment’s reflection to recognize such hubris and the irony of its outcome.\(^2\) Now, in the twenty-first century, I would suggest that the motif of the exchange of power figures the story’s own definition, its ability to cohere. Does it in fact cohere? Dhommée thinks Melmoth’s diabolical manipulations resemble Balzac’s, “[qui] n’est pas dupe de sa prétention réaliste qui consiste sans cesse à occulter et dissimuler les origines discursives du récit” [[who] is not a dupe to his realist pretensions which consist in repeatedly hiding and dissimulating the discursive origins of the tale] (54). But the ending is such a tumble, a dégringolade from the high fantastic into buffoonery, that it raises the question of Balzac’s real intent. (The intentional fallacy is intentional on my part.) Are we reading high comedy, as in La Comédie humaine or for that matter divine, or is it low farce?

Like the change of venue from Ireland to Paris, the exchanges of the power down the degrading ladder resolve the story on the satire of Paris, where Balzac’s point is that Melmoth would have found millions of people ready to take his place, had Maturin only thought to put him in the capital of money, which is pointedly incarnated in the ironic hero, the cashier. Gaillard speaks of the relativity of all values in modernity: “Or avec Melmoth réconcilié nous quittons l’univers de la transcendance des valeurs pour entrer dans celui de leur relativité; nous quittons le monde de l’hétéronomie qui est celui des sociétés traditionnelles pour entrer dans le monde de l’autonomie qui est celui des sociétés modernes” [But with Melmoth réconcilié we leave behind the universe where values are transcendent to enter one where they are relative; we leave behind the world of heteronomy, the domain of traditional societies, and enter the world of autonomy, the domain of modern societies] (“Aux limites” 125). It is understood that “modern society,” in Balzac, indexes nascent capitalism. The simple principle is that power comes with money and money with power: the holder of the power gets all the money he would need to buy love—but the irony about Paris, “cette succursale de l’Enfer” [that branch office of Hell] (10: 346), is that he does not get love. The story realizes this intention fully with the ending, where social satire re-orients the entire plot and undermines its serious message. And yet, paradoxically, and this is Anne-Marie Meininger’s point in her introduction in the Folio edition (25), by turning Melmoth’s power into a financial force that loses value and disappears, Balzac “saves” the visionary aspect of this

\(^2\) I have in mind a well-written article by Léo Mazet, “Récit[s] dans le récit: l’échange du récit chez Balzac.”
power. Philosophy may be lost in the capital of money, but the *Études philosophiques* and Balzac himself, visionary of the real, seek to preserve all its value deep in the vaults of the human comedy.

Human comedy, governed by “le principe Honneur,” perdures behind the low farce and relativizing force of “le principe Argent.” Turning the exchange of a philosophical power into a monetary negotiation symbolizes the risks the narrative takes, as an item of value, if there are no buyers for lack of faith—faith in the ability of the narrator to tell a story worth knowing about. Balzac exposes himself to this loss of value every time he writes. And yet we continue to believe in the reality of his inventions, for that is the job his writing assigns to the reader: to bring unity in the face of relentless diabolical disunity. I see Balzac himself in the figure of Melmoth, empowered and yet tormented by his immense ability, but finally dying the death of a mere human, reconciled with the ordinary, having passed his power on to others less great. The sufficiently intelligent reader, imbued with the principles guiding Balzac’s anthropology, knows what it takes to reconcile Balzac, so he may expect peaceful eternity. It is indeed a lucky thing that “Il y a de l’instruction en France” [People are educated in France], for if that were not the case, without readers, humanity would have to accept the loss of greatness: the only writers left at the end of *Melmoth réconcilié* are mere scribblers, copiers, and jokesters.